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AUTHOR Lutz, Frank W.: McDonnell, Thomas F.
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ABSTRACT

One purpose of this paper was to describe the present process of machine government and private-regarding practices in local school government. Another purpose was to theorize from these data, based on selected conceptual notions, about the political process in educational governance. Data for the study came from a Pennsylvania superintendent whose school district was involved in charges of school board member corruption. The paper offers a descriptive account of the community, the political machine, and the amount of money involved, as well as how the system operated. The major conclusion stemming from the data, is that private-regarding machine government still exists in the governance of public education, and it can, and often does, produce corruption in that government. Further, it appeared that as corruption occurred in the districts mentioned, it was intricately entwined with machine politics and corruption at all levels of government. The paper theorizes that when an electorate becomes dissatisfied with a machine-type school board, it can be more effective in changing the board through the elective process than it can be when dissatisfied and confronted with a reform-type school board structure.
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MACHINE POLITICS IN LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

Frank W. Lutz
The Pennsylvania State University

and

Thomas F. McDonnell

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MACHINE POLITICS IN LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Introduction

This paper is deliberately intended to be provocative and controversial. It is intended to challenge well established biases and stimulate controversy, debate and additional research. The paper reports research carefully carried out by established ethnographic practices and theorizes about that data using well known theoretical concepts. It does not test hypotheses nor suggest that its positions are ultimate truth or infallible laws. Rather, its conclusions do account for the data collected. They are generated by the data and as such are offered as usuable and gounded hypotheses for future research.

The process of machine politics is not new to government in the United States. Although usually associated with the "Big City Machine" image, it has by no means been limited to that arena. The process of city government reform was paralleled, if not stimulated, by the reform movements in education government (see Callahan, 1975). The general demise of the big city machine and the dominance of relative reform processes during the past half century has left the general impression that machine politics is dead.

The purpose of this paper is two fold: (1) to describe the present process of machine government and private-regarding practices in local school government and, (2) to theorize from these data, based on selected conceptual notions, about the political process in education governance.

Conceptual Framework

In order to accomplish the second objective of this paper concepts were selected from three theoretical frameworks. From the work of Banfield and Wilson (1966), the concepts of machine-reform government and private-public regarding are used. The sacred-secular community continuum proposed by Becker (1950) and applied to local school districts by Iannaccone and Lutz (1970) is used to examine the nature of the political culture of the community and Barley's (1965) elite-arena council styles is used to examine the decision-making processes of the local school board.

Machine-Reform Structures - An essential prerequisite to the theorizing to follow is the acceptance of machine-reform as a concept in political science and not as a description of the normative dichotomy represented by immoral vs moral political behavior. Machine government, whatever its morality and operational realities in a particular place, is fundamentally a gemeinschaft structure having its life support system in the "community" at the grass roots level. Reform government is literally a leap away from community and party politics and represents, in its purer form, government by the trained professional. Its essence is the ideal typical bureaucracy undisturbed by the pressures of the interests of publics and people. It is gesellschraft in nature. In its pure form it is the dictatorship of the Philosopher Kings, where government knows and does what is best for the people--in spite of the people.

What is described above is not intended to be normative but descriptive; not value ladened but value free. If one might imagine that the philosophers value most government by the "Philosopher Kings" and the

peasants value most "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity," even at the cost of anarchy, then Banfield and Wilsons (1950, p. 123) statement that the upper-middle and upper class prefer reform and the poor, minority and immigrant groups prefer machine government comes as no surprise. In any case, it is the differences in the form of the governance processes, from gemeinschaft to gesellschaft, that is the essence of the political phenomenon referred to here as the concept machine-reform and not the normative nature, the morality, of the government.

Private vs Public-Regarding--Again we use this concept as an intellectual tool for analyses, not as a normative continuum. Private-regarding is a preference for allocation systems that are related to individual needs and wants, and are specific in nature. Public-regarding prefers allocation systems that are related to the "good of all," "the public" in the sense of a single public as opposed to many publics or individuals.

Public-regarding requires that allocation systems be broad and oriented to a generalized or synthesized need and want structure assumed to be held by everyone. Private-regarding provides a job for a person who is unemployed. Public-regarding provides public jobs or public welfare for the unemployed. Either system may require some type of "kickback" or hope to acquire the voters' loyality because of the way they allocate the resources. Public vs public-regarding, as used here, is a concept free of the corrupt-immoral connotations usually associated with machine government and private regarding systems. Free of such, private-regarding is akin to the free enterprise system valued in the United States (Banfield and Wilson 1950, p. 115).

Public-regarding is closer to the social democracies operating in nations such as Sweden or Great Britian.

Sacred-Secular--Originally developed to describe community types, sacred-secular has been effectively used to analyze a school board's attitudes, values and behavior in relationship to the communities social processes. Sacred is similar to gemeinschaft. It is "folklike," preferring private means of knowing, communicating, deciding and rewarding. Secular is similar to geschellschaft. It tends to be bureaucratic, preferring public, universalistic means of knowing (experts), communicating, deciding, and rewarding.

Elite-Arena--This concept is used to analyze the decision making process of a governing council, in this case the school board. Elite councils think of themselves as separate from and trustees for the people. In their attempt to discharge their trusteeship, they seek consenses in private regarding what is best for the people and then enact that concensus in a unanimous public vote. Arena councils think of themselves as the community in council. They represent the different and often conflicting values of the community. They are delegates for the people. They decide by public debate and counterdebate and in the end decide in public by a non-unanimous vote.

Method

In the mid 1970s eleven northeastern Pennsylvania school districts were involved in charges of school board member corruption. Twenty-four board members from these districts were indicted by federal grand juries. Twelve

of the twenty-four board members were from but two districts, Duncun and Endicott.* Ten of these twelve members eventually served jail sentences and/or paid fines after being found guilty of the charges.

For nine years from 1971 to 1979, first in Duncun and then in Endicott, Tom Macklin served as school superintendent, serving in Endicott at the time of the trials. Although it would be hard to imagine that Macklin was unaware of the illegal activities taking place around him, he continues to contend that he never participated in them, had no first hand knowledge of them, nor profited from them. Several facts substantiate that claim. He never paid a kickback on his salary; he was informed by the board selector in Endicott that according to the state code the business manager reported directly to the board and that he (Macklin) was to "keep his nose out of that area;" although summoned as a witness in the grand jury investigations he was never indicted or found guilty of any participation in the criminal activites.

Following the investigations, indictments, trials and sentences, Macklin gathered the data for this study. Data sources included: personal appointment calendars; school board minutes; personal notes made over the previous eight years; a diary of an unindicted board member; newspaper accounts; grand jury and trial transcripts; and recorded interviews with newspaper persons, the former Duncun Board solicitor, the Endicott business manager, two of the

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* The names of the districts and the individuals used in this paper are code names for real places and real people.

Duncun board members who had served prison-terms, a business man who gave major kickback to both boards (and other unindicted government public agencies in the area), and selected community residents. Thus he developed a case study of the machine type, private regarding school boards that serves as the data base for this research.

Data

Obviously the entire case cannot be presented here. Therefore a capsule description of the community and the machine governance of the school including selected brief quotes for illustration purposes will have to suffice.

The Community--The Duncun and Endicott school districts lie adjacent to Brandon, a city of about 100,000. Excluding Brandon there are ten other school districts with average daily memberships between 1,500 and 4,000 pupils. The average membership of Duncun is 2,400 pupils and of Endicott, 1,900. The county's population tends to be composed of older people as compared to national averages with a total population of almost a quarter of a million, 44% are 50 years or older and only 25% (as compared to a national average of 35%) between 19 and 35 years. Unemployment is a major problem in the county averaging from 7.2% to 11% between 1974 and 1978. Almost 50% of the county's residents earn less than $10,000/year. A major demographic study (Yankelovich, 1975) classified the social class of the residents as: high-20%, medium-35%, and low-45%. Two thirds of all families (as compared to 30% nationally) report that at least one in the family is a union member.

Activities, generally classified as "cultural" such as philhormonic and thespian socieities have been established by the two colleges in the county but receive little support from the community at large. In general, the community prefers to watch television in homes or local taverns with close friends. Discussions center on local politics and local and national sporting events. These discussions tend to take the form more of local gossip rather than orienting toward national or international issues.

Residents generally think positively of their community as "small town," somewhat behind the progressive rush of the rest of the country. Two thirds of the voters are registered Democrats.*

The Machine--A single party operated the political machine in this county. They managed to consistently elect the majority of the members in both the Duncun and Endicott school boards and maintain control of other local and county government. Although "reform candidates" were occasionally elected from both parties, such members remained in the minority. The majority machine members regularly met in separate caucus to determine their private course of action and divide the "spoils." In other "educational" areas, not directly concerned with jobs, contracts and kickbacks, the majority acted with the minority as a total board. The following are selected events and quotes illustrating the activities and values of the machine numbers of these school boards.

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* As will be noted later this does not imply that a single party holds an option of machine government, private regarding values or corruption.

On June 8, 1971 the Duncun Board passed its budget for the coming school year. The budget included a $1,600 raise for the district's solicitor. When the meeting ended Mr. Murphy a machine majority member accompanied the solicitor to his car. According to the solicitor he was asked for a 20%-25% kickback on a fee paid him a few weeks earlier for "extra work" in the District's behalf. The solicitor refused. As a result he was denied his $1,600 raise and six months later, he felt required to resign his district relationship. Murphy, the leader of the machine majority who served a prison sentence, explained the request to the researchers later, "School boards don't get paid, so they steal a dollar!" Asked at the trial if perhaps he had only been asked for a compaign contribution, the solicitor replied--no, ". . . it was asked for after the election was over, in terms of a piece of a fee . . . a percentage of a fee."

A major requirement of being a majority machine caucus member, and receiving the benefits of such membership, was having the absolute confidence of the machine. The following is from the transcript of the trial of O'Mellay the bagman for the machine majority.

> U.S. Attorney: What did you do with the money after you received it from Mr. Key [an office equipment business who gave kickbacks].
>
> O'Mellay: I divided it equally among all majority members with the exception of Mr. Black.
>
> U.S. Attorney: Why did you not give money to Mr. Black.
>
> O'Mellay: We didn't quite trust him.

But Black was a member of the same party and wanted to be in on "the take." The leader of the machine caucus told the following story at a local bar

during one of the usual afternoon "coffee breaks" from their patronage political jobs. Black had called concerned that he was being short changed. At the end of their conversation, Black asked, "Am I in or am I out?" The caucus head reassured him, "you're in, you're in!" This caused uproarious laughter among the political cronies at the bar.

Black himself testified as to his expectations.

> U.S. Attorney: Did you have an understanding in your mind how the contractor and vendors would be treated?
>
> Black: Well, in a way, yes.
>
> U.S. Attorney: Understood what, sir?
>
> Black: What might be coming in . . . I don't know how you would say it . . . I guess a kickback.

Nor did these corrupt private-regarding practices occur within the present Duncun and Endicott boards alone. According to one vendor, new members coming on the board only changed the players. He testified, "well judge, with Mr. O'Mellay, I think we were operating on ten percent. So all we were doing was changing the characters. The school board changed, the players were different, but the game was the same. It was about ten percent."

The Cost In Dollars--Another question is how much money was involved, remembering these are districts with between 2000 and 2500 pupils. One former board member, who testified with immunity, said he was not sure but thought that he had received between $5000 and $6000 over his 2 1/2 years on the board. But this seems low in view of other testimony of vendors and contractors. A contractor reported paying $3000 to get a construction repair contract. The disposed superintendent had been asked to pay $2000 for reappointment, a sporting goods vendor reported paying $2190, another

sporting goods vendor reported paying more than $25,000 during a two year period, a music company vendor $1040, a typewritter dealer $100 per machine, a landscapper $3000, and an office equipment dealer reported paying kick-backs totaling $19,000. That office equipment dealer admitted having a "hidden account" of $600,000 just for such purposes. It is interesting to note that none of these businessmen were ever prosecuted for bribing, income tax evasion or for having originally lied to the grand jury. All were granted immunity for their testimony against the indicted school board members. One might question whether it is corruption in government that creates the corruption in private business or the reverse? If these businessmen would have gotten "preferred treatment" but kept the "excess profit" for themselves, would the situation have been less immoral? What is clear, in this case at least, is that the federal government thought it more important to prosecute these minor government officials, who admitted extorting about $3000 per year from businessmen, than to prosecute a businessman who admitted to hidding $600,000, to use for such purposes without paying taxes on the amount. When and as corruption is condoned in the private sector can it be eliminated in the public sector?

The Process--Given a fairly elaborate system of checks and balances, how does such a system operate? One answer is that the state code deliberaty removed one of the checks by permitting the business aspects of the district to operate without the direct supervision of the school superintendent. We have noted two superintendents and a solicitor refused to make kickbacks and two lost their job. The third was able to ignore the situation because he was directed, with the force of state law, to "keep his nose out of it."

He was also exempted from paying kickbacks due to other favors he had given the county political boss.

Within this structure, the actual process of corrupt private-regarding is interesting. Asked how it worked one vendor reported:

> O'Neil: After receiving the checks, appointments would be made to pass the money.
>
> U.S. Attorney: Why did you give him the money?
>
> O'Neil: . . . it wasn't demanded, but it was understood that the money would be paid.
>
> U.S. Attorney: How did you obtain the understanding?
>
> O'Neil: It wasn't really my understanding. It was something carried on from the previous [owner].
>
> U.S. Attorney: You said that whenever you got a check you would get a telephone call.
>
> O'Neil" That's right.
>
> U.S. Attorney: Would that happen everytime you got a check?
>
> O'Neil: Yes, it would . . . .
>
> U.S. Attorney: What would he [Murphy] say?
>
> O'Neil: . . . something to the effect that, "Will you be in [my office] this afternoon?
>
> U.S. Attorney: How would you give him the money?
>
> O'Neil: In cash . . . always!

Another vendor reported about the method of being able to make a good profit while still making a kickback.

> Key: Well, we'd be asked to ship less than the order called for.
>
> U.S. Attorney: Who explained that to you?
>
> Key: Mr. Murphy.
>
> U.S. Attorney: Did he ask you to do that?

O'Neil: He said it was a possible way of doing business with him.

U.S. Attorney: Why did you ship short?

O'Neil: Well, so we could give monies back to the board.

Another vendor reported how the system worked when the materials were bid through the state agency for delivery to the local district. Reporting on a kickback on a $62,000 deal, this furniture vendor testified:

U.S. Attorney: Why did you make a kickback on the business you received from the state authority?

Franco: Well, because it was already more or less agreed to before . . . .

U.S. Attorney: On that job how were you guaranteed that you would be the low bidder?

Franco: I have done a lot of state bidding in the past. if you have your own specifications in, you have a leeway of ten percent. So that the ten percent with your specs and the ten on them [the short shipping], it is twenty percent.

U.S. Attorney: When you say you have your specifications in, what do you mean by that?

Franco: I set up all the specifications . . . if somebody is roughly ten percent lower than I . . . the state will bend a little and give the district . . . [the vendor] they want.

U.S. Attorney: . . . if you were going in as the lowest bidder, how were you able to make a kickback?

Franco: On short material . . . if the bid called for a dozen mop heads, I probably ship eight . . . [and bill] for ten.

Franco went on to say if he made a mistake and shorted the district in something they really needed he would get a call and immediately deliver it.

U.S. Attorney: If you ever decide [to be dishonest again] you won't do it the same way again?

Franco: You had better believe it. So I wasn't trying to hide it too much.

U.S. Attorney: You thought you had a good idea going?

Franco: I had a wonderful thing going until this investigation came out. It was beautiful.

U.S. Attorney: . . . but you were caught at it?

Franco: It was against my conscience, but the bank account eased it.

Finally, we were interested in the political culture that permitted and/or encouraged the machine, private-regarding, and corrupt nature of education governance in these boards. The demographic data presented earlier is descriptive of the community. The following is descriptive of the normative expressions of the community.

Even during his campaign for election, Murphy made no secret of his motivations when talking to his political cronies, asking, "Who the hell in his right mind would spend time and money trying to get somewhere without getting something out of it?" After his conviction and having served his sentence, Murphy stated, "The people of Duncun didn't realize what they had, the people who replaced us . . . are still increasing the fucken millage. Where's all the money going? . . . They're stealing that fuckin money. One thing we never did was raise taxes because we had a philosophy . . . ."

Another convicted board member reported, "Who did I rob." Did I rob the taxpayer? No! I took a little bit of profit off the contractor. Instead of him making $2,700 . . . he'd make $2,000 and gave me $700. Who got hurt?

Murphy pointed to one answer at least--no body got hurt and lots of people got help. He pointed out the political patronage jobs that were

available to the party faithfully, in addition to the benefits to local business. He further described how private business participated in making jobs available for party favors when the patronage jobs ran out, "Take a look at [that] guy . . . . Look at the people he employs at his plant. He's got Billy . . . 's wife, Paul . . ., Ralph . . ., Lillian . . .'s daughter, John's wife. They're all out at the first word, . . . [all] Slavic. Don't you think that helps keep his brother . . . on the council? And look at Sam, his family's got every Italian in the third word on the payroll at that laundry? You think that doesn't help a guy like him?"

And it was not only the indicted and convicted who justified the corruption. One teacher who had received several extra pay jobs said, "These guys built a whole new school system without increasing taxes. Who cares if they were able to make a couple bucks for themselves in the process?" A school patron said, "I'd rather talk to Murphy about my kids than some clown who moves into the district one year and decides to run for the board the next." Another resident expressed his preference for the indited board members in the following fashion, "Like the man said--better the devil you know, than the devil you don't."

Although the other party won the majority in one of the two districts for one term following the convictions, the same party machine elected their candidates and by the following election the machine was again firmly in control of the two school boards. The majority sentiment of the electorate seemed to be that the indicted were "typical politicians who were unfortunate to be in the wrong place at the wrong time." This seems typical of the values of the majority of the electorate in this particular section of the state, where a nationally prominent member of the U.S. House of Representatives

was indicted convicted, censored by the House and forced to resign. Large billboards, defense funds and locally expressed sentiment still indicate the strong support of the local electorate for this individual--who had "done good," for them.

Analyses

Although one might theoretically expect that a private-regarding machine would produce an arena council where the different values and needs of the various publics would be publically debated as resources were allocated, this did not occur in the Duncun and Endicott boards. The only occasional debate took place between the machine majority and the reform minority on the boards. The behavior of the machine was typically elite. They decided in secret who got the contract, how much kickback would be required and how it would be divided. Of course they had to operate in that fashion, requiring total concensus, or they would all go to jail.

Yet in the absence of corrupt and illegal practices, one would suspect a board who thought of themselves as delegates who are, required to do the will of the people to stay in office, would express the needs of the separate interests in public debate. And so we have occasionally seen it operate on other boards elected by wards (in machine fashion) as opposed to the "at large" reform fashion.* Thus, we propose:

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* See William N. Knisely "School Board Conflict Behavior and Superintendent Survival," Ed.D. dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, March, 1980.

Machine form, private-regarding boards that operate in elite fashion are more susceptible to corruption than machine boards operating in arena fashion.

The above statement is intended to make an unusual point--corruption is not the necessary result of or limited to machine type of government or private-regarding. In fact corruption has also been noted among elite, reform school boards purporting public-regarding values.* It is noted, however, that our two cases of corrupt machine as well as in the Knisely case of a non-corrupt machine, the people were relatively satisfied with their board members. In both cases board members often shouted insults at each other, but the people returned "their" representatives (or others from the same machine) to office.

Thus we propose that:

Where the political culture values delegate as opposed to trustee representation, they will prefer machine government and private-regarding behavior. Such a preference is independent of their attitudes related about corruption.

Further, the evidence from this research supports the notion that even corrupt machines can be coincident with the political culture of the community and their values. Under these conditions mere indictment and/or conviction will not end the domination of the corrupt machine or the corruption. While the total community never supported the corruption (i.e. the T.V. station constantly criticized the machine and its corruption and was in turn criticized for that stand by other area newsmen) the majority of the electorate evidently was satisfied enough as they consistently returned the same political machine to office and that machine continued

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* For instance the 1960 action of the New York State Legislature removing the entire New York City "Reform Board" for alledged corruption.

to work with the convicted officials (i.e. after his release from prison Murphy was named by the party as co-chairman of the testimonial dinner for the retiring police chief). As suggested in the Dissatisfaction Theory of American Democracy (see Lutz and Iannaccone 1979), the electorate moves only when it is dissatisfied and then they will move to change things. The American electorate can get what they want--therefore they get what they deserve.

These data suggest that the sacred nature of the community surrounding the Duncun and Endicott districts supported the machine type of government. The pervasive nature of the corruption and the involvement of private business further suggests this relationship. It supports the proposal that perhaps:

> Private enterprise, like machine government, prefers private-regarding. It also suggests the question of whether in our society there is private condoning of corruption with a public condeming it. As noted by some of the convicted officials, it is interesting that the federal attorney was not interested in prosecuting the vendor who had hidden, and not paid taxes on $600,000 but convicted 11 minor public officials who averaged $3000 "take" a year.

Conclusion

The major conclusion steming directly from these data is that private-regarding machine government still exists in the governance of public education and it can and often does produce corruption in that government. Further, it appeared that as corruption occurred in these districts it was intrically entwined with machine politics, private-regarding and corruption all the way to the top, including the federal politics of the area.

As one might guess, under such circumstances this type of government was pervasive in the area. While there were sporadic changes (ups and downs for the machine) the machine had retained its power over a considerable period of time. While the corruption, if not the actual machine form of government, had its occasional antagonists, it received the general support of the majority of the voters. As suggested by Banfield and Wilson, the machine found the majority of its support from among the lower classes and ethnic minorities, and the machine's gemeinschaft structure found support in the sacred community structure of the area.

Although not reported here, some of the data suggest that the process of rooting out corruption not only fails to eliminate corruption (merely changing the actors in the corrupt game) but actually has the political purpose of embarrassing the opposition party. Person after person, those indicted and those given immunity alike, related the fact that earlier state investigations had netted nothing. The process that emerged in this study was as follows:

1. One national party is embarrassed by scandal at the national level:
   (a) They then seek to demonstrate other party corruption at the local level.

2. The justice department of that national administration seeks out:
   (a) A state whose governor is from the other party.
   (b) A school board dominated by a machine of the other party, which is corrupt as well.

3. A federal grand jury is impanelled, evidence gathered by the justice department, indetermints obtained and culprits brought before a federal judge appointed by the party in national office.

In our cases the Republicans were nationally in power, suffered Watergate, and in a state with a Democratic dominated corrupt machine school boards. Just after the study terminated the Democrats were in the White House, Carter had been embarrassed by his "Budget Boss Scandal." In the same state, now

headed by a Republican governor, the federal justice department sought out a corrupt machine school board dominated by the Republican party and obtained indictments against several of its Republican members. While these limited cases do not prove the propositions (surely there must be devient cases in this or in other states), they certainly lead to some interesting hypotheses.

Both of the machine school boards in this study were corrupt and linked into the grass roots of ward type (as opposed to reform, at large) elections. Both of these machines exhibited largely elite council styles. Another machine board, also linked into the grass roots of ward elections, and studied at approximately the same time in the same state, exhibited largely arena style council behavior and showed no evidence of corruption or illegal activity. Again our data do not prove but rather suggest that:

> Machine boards, exhibiting private-regarding and also elite council behavior, tend to be corrupt while the same machine governance type and private-regarding pattern exhibited by an arena type council tend not to be corrupt (perhaps because they are forced to go public).

Theorizing about the nature of the machine-reform type of government; the private vs public-regarding values and corruption vs non-corruption, we insisted that these are three independent concepts. Additionally, we speculated that the private-regarding nature of the machine is in tune with the general free enterprise ethic of this nation help by both management and labor, each seeking to maximize their own specific rewards; while the public-regarding of the reform is more akin to the social democracies of Sweden and Great Britian. Thus (and here is a very controversial proposition in conclusion):

In local school boards, the fundamental grass roots unit of American Democracy (see Lutz and Iannaccone, 1978, p. 129-132), the majority of the electorate will be better satisfied and served by private regarding, machine school boards (not necessarily party dominated) and hopefully not corrupt.

Upper class interests are more satisfied and better served by public-regarding, reform school boards, and their reform nature does not necessarily preclude the possibility of corruption.

Further, when the electorate becomes dissatisfied with a machine type school board they can be more effective in changing the board through the elective process than they will be when dissatisfied and confronted with a reform type school board structure.

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